
Environmental Fact Sheet



U.S. ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY REGION 10

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ASBESTOS IN ATTIC INSULATION

As a result of recent newspaper articles, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) office in Seattle has received a large number of phone calls from citizens concerned about asbestos-containing insulation in their attics. EPA is working hard to gather more information about attic insulation and other products containing vermiculite that may be contaminated with asbestos.

The following information provides a common sense approach to help you find out what kind of attic insulation you have and decide what to do if you have vermiculite attic insulation.

Background

EPA believes that a number of manufacturers produced attic insulation from vermiculite. One mine in the United States produced over 70 percent of the world's vermiculite before the mine was closed in 1990. Ore from this mine is known to have asbestos contamination which contaminates any products from this ore.

Why is it a Problem?

If disturbed, the asbestos fibers in vermiculite attic insulation may get into the air. These fibers can be inhaled and become trapped in the lungs and may cause diseases such as asbestosis, lung cancer, and mesothelioma. These diseases may show up many years after exposure to asbestos.

What Does it Look Like?

Vermiculite is a mineral that is shaped like a small nugget, and varies in color from silver-gold to gray-brown (see picture at right). The asbestos fibers contained in vermiculite attic insulation are generally too small to be seen without magnification. Only a trained technician using careful microscopic examination can see asbestos fibers.



Pieces of Vermiculite Attic Insulation

What Should I Do if I Have it?

Look at the insulation in your attic without disturbing it. If it appears you have vermiculite attic insulation in your attic, we recommend the following steps:

1. If you do not need to remodel or disturb the insulation, LEAVE IT ALONE! If it's sealed behind wallboards and floorboards or is isolated in an attic that is vented outside, the best approach is to keep it in place.
2. If you are concerned about asbestos contamination in the living quarters of your home, you can consider air monitoring. This will show if any asbestos has been or is being released from the insulation into the air in your home. The air monitoring must be done by trained professionals.
3. If you are planning to remodel or remove your insulation, have the insulation tested first.
 - A. EPA recommends using a trained and certified professional to conduct the tests. Use certified asbestos removal professionals to remove your vermiculite attic insulation using a "negative pressure enclosure" technique. This technique will prevent asbestos fibers and dust from escaping from your attic into the rest of your home. Using professionals is expensive. Do not attempt to do this yourself. You could spread asbestos fibers throughout your home, putting you and your family at risk of inhaling asbestos fibers.
 - B. After the vermiculite attic insulation is removed, you may want to consider having air monitoring tests done in your attic and throughout the living areas of your home. This is to ensure that the concentration of asbestos fibers in the home is low or not present.

How Do I Find a Trained and Certified Asbestos Removal Professional?

A certified asbestos inspector will be able to take samples of your insulation, provide you with information on the results, and advise you on what additional tests or options you might consider. Inspectors can be found in the Yellow Pages under "Asbestos Consulting and Testing" or "Asbestos Abatement". Ask the inspector to provide you with the name of the company that trained and certified him or her. Call that company to confirm whether a particular inspector has had the required training and has up-to-date accreditation. Companies that can test the air in your home will be found under the same listings.

Where Can I Get More Information?

New information can be found on the hotline and websites below as it becomes available.

For current information on asbestos and health related information, contact EPA's TSCA Hotline at 1-202-554-1404, or visit EPA's Region 10 website at www.epa.gov/R10earth (click on Index, then Asbestos).

Also visit the federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) website at www.cdc.atsdr.gov, or the Washington State Department of Health at www.doh.wa.gov/ehp/ts.